Kenneth Sperber Gapp

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Universal Famine
under Claudius

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NOTES

THE UNIVERSAL FAMINE UNDER CLAUDIUS

THE historian Luke states that during the reign of Claudius a famine distressed the whole inhabited world.[1] Although several local famines in this period are well attested,[2] a general famine has not heretofore been confirmed by non-Biblical evidence. However, the recent publication of valuable information regarding the economic conditions in Egypt during the reign of Claudius presents new evidence in support of the account of Luke. We shall, therefore, study in turn (1) the Egyptian famine, (2) the Judaean famine, (3) the universal famine, and (4) the accessibility to Luke of definite evidence for the general famine.

THE EGYPTIAN FAMINE

The abundance of the harvest in Egypt was directly dependent upon the height of the rise of the river Nile. When the Nile did not flood to a satisfactory level, the insufficient amount of moisture necessitated an early planting and resulted in a poor crop. On the other hand, an excessively high Nile flooded the fields far beyond the customary season for planting, and thus caused a late harvest far below the normal size.[3] For a low Nile under Claudius there is no evidence. There is, however, definite information that there was an unusually

[1] Acts xi, 27–30.

[2] There were famines at Rome in 41 (Seneca, de brev. vit. 18. 5; Aurelius Victor, de Caes. 4. 3), in 42 (Dio, LX, 11), and in 51 (Tacitus, Ann. XII, 43; Suet., Claudius 18. 2; Orosius, Hist. VII, 6. 17; A. Schoene, Eusebii chronicorum libri duo, Berlin, 1875, II, pp. 152 f.). There is no evidence for famine at Rome in 43 (cf. Dio, LX, 17. 8), nor in 47 (cf. Tac., Ann. XI, 4), nor in 48 (cf. Dio, LX, 31. 4; Tac., Ann. XI, 26). There was a famine in Greece about 49 (A. Schoene, loc. cit.), a shortage of military supplies in Armenia in 51 (Tac., Ann. XII, 50), and speculation in grain at Cibyra (cf. M. Rostovtzeff, Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft im Römischen Kaiserreich, Berlin, 1929, note 20 to chapter VIII). However, the universal famine cannot satisfactorily be explained by assuming that it consisted in a sequence of local famines, for such a sequence has no objective unity.

[3] Pliny, Nat. hist. V, 58, XVIII, 167 ff.; Strabo, XVII, I. 3, 4; Amm. Marc., XXII, 15. 12 f. The accuracy of these accounts has been demonstrated by L. Borchardt, Nilmesser und Nilstandsmarken (Anhang zu den Abhandlungen der K. Preuss. Akad. der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, Berlin, 1906, Abt. I, pp. 1–55).

high Nile during the reign of Claudius, in fact, the highest Nile of which Pliny found record. On this occasion the river rose to a height of eighteen cubits.[4] This was two cubits above the ideal height of sixteen, beyond which, as Ammianus Marcellinus records, no cultivator wished the river to rise. Since a famine occurred whenever the Nile rose to more than sixteen cubits,[5] there can be no doubt that this, the highest Nile in more than a century, certainly produced extensive distress in Egypt. A famine in Egypt during at least one year of the reign of Claudius is, therefore, definitely established.

The Egyptian famine may be dated in the year 45 on the evidence of the recently published documents from the register of the Grapheion at Tebtunis.[6] In August, September and November of this year the price of grain, as recorded in the papyri from Tebtunis, averaged about eight drachmas an artaba.[7] Thus the cost of wheat at this time was more than twice as high as any other recorded price in the Roman period before the reign of Vespasian.[8] It is impossible to determine, however, whether the fall of 45 marked the beginning or the end of the famine. Since Egypt at this time was dependent upon the harvest of the previous spring, a natural assumption is that the harvest of 45

[4] Pliny, Nat. hist. V, 58.

[5] Pliny, Nat. hist. XVIII, 168.

[6] A. E. R. Boak, Papyri from Tebtunis, Part I (Michigan papyri, Vol. II), Ann Arbor, 1933; cf. the review by Allan Chester Johnson, The American Historical Review, XL, 1935, pp. 480–483.

[7] A. E. R. Boak, op. cit. no. 123, verso, XI, 26–27; no. 127, I, 8, 12–14, 16, 17, 38. In A.D. 3 the price had been three drachmas an artaba (F. Preisigke, Sammelbuch Griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten, Strassburg, 1915–, no. 7341, 22–23); in 33 the price had been three drachmas an artaba (U. Wilcken, Griechische Ostraka aus Aegypten und Nubien, Leipzig, 1899, II, no. 1372); in 65 the price was only two drachmas and one obol an artaba (J. Tait, Greek Ostraka, London, 1930, I, p. 108, no. 210).

[8] Subsidiary arguments for the occurrence of famine may be drawn from the economic conditions of this year. Unusual distress is indicated by the fact that about one-sixth of the documents in P. Mich. 123 reveal indebtedness on the part of the inhabitants of Tebtunis. The rather large number of contracts for the nursing of slave children seems to imply that an unusually large number of children were exposed by parents unable to provide sustenance for their offspring. The leases of land reveal an unusual situation. More than a third of the leases (63 in a total of 136) specify pasturage or the raising of fodder. Inasmuch as cereals were the predominant crop in Egypt, this proportion may indicate that the cultivation of wheat in 45–46 was considered unprofitable because of a very high Nile; cf. A. C. Johnson, loc. cit. Stefan Waszyński (Die Bodenpacht, I, Leipzig, 1905) lists in all 133 leases of land, of which only seven deal with pasture land. This ratio has not greatly been affected by documents published since that date, apart from the Michigan papyri under consideration. See also F. Preisigke, S. B. no. 7461, and the low rent of one and one-third artaba per aroura in P. Lond. 604B (Vol. III, pp. 76 ff., about A.D. 47).

was very poor. Yet in the autumn of 45 the approximate size of the crop of 46 could be estimated from the reports of the rise of the Nile. If the forecast of the harvest of 46 was unusually poor, an immediate rise in price may have been caused by the hoarding of grain and by speculation in anticipation of a famine in the year 46–47. Thus the famine may have extended either from the fall of 44 to the spring of 46 or from the fall of 45 to the spring of 47. In any case, the price of grain in the fall of 45 affords definite evidence of famine at least from the fall of 45 to the next harvest in the spring of 46.

The Judaean Famine

When Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch, Agabus came from Jerusalem and prophesied that there would be a famine over the whole inhabited world.[9] The Christians at Antioch, realizing that, because of the expense of transporting grain by land, the distress in Jerusalem would be far greater than in the commercial center of Antioch, took up a collection and sent the money to the elders in Jerusalem by the hands of Barnabas and of Paul. This famine, according to Luke, came to pass during the reign of Claudius.

To this same famine, beyond all question, must be referred the incidents recorded by Josephus of the great Judaean famine, which occurred during the rule of the procurator Tiberius Alexander, that is, either in 46 or 47.[10] When the famine reached its height, Helena, the queen of Adiabene, visited Jerusalem and saw that many people were dying because they had no money to buy food. Moved to compassion, she sent her agents to Cyprus to purchase dried figs, and to Egypt to purchase grain. The cost of these provisions involved considerable expense. Yet the food was transported to Jerusalem very quickly,

[9] Acts xi, 27–30. On the meaning of *ὅλη ἡ οἰκουμένη* see Th. Zahn, Einleitung in das Neue Testament[3], (Leipzig, 1907), II, p. 422. Karl Schmidt (Die Apostelgeschichte, Erlangen, 1882, I, pp. 157–164) would restrict the meaning of the phrase to the eastern and central possessions of Rome. C. C. Torrey (The Composition and Date of Acts, Harvard Theological Studies, Cambridge, I, 1916, pp. 20 f.) limits the significance of the phrase to Judaea upon the assumption of an Aramaic source for this portion of Acts.

[10] Josephus, Antiq. XX, 51–53, 101, III, 320 f.; Eusebius, Hist. eccles. II, 3, 8, 12; A. Schoene, loc. cit.; Orosius, Hist. VII, 6. 12; Zonaras, VI, 13 (= Paris 1, 283D); Bede, Hist. eccles. I, 3. For the date of this famine, see Th. Zahn, *op. cit.* II, pp. 641 ff.; F. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake, ed., The Beginnings of Christianity, London, 1920–, Part I, V, pp. 452–455. The season of the year may be fixed with some probability in spring, for Josephus (Antiq. III, 320) refers to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The beneficence of Helena was certainly not extended in mid-winter, for the supplies which she purchased arrived very quickly (Josephus, Antiq. XX, 52).

and afforded great relief to the poor of the city. Further assistance was later obtained from Izates, the son of Helena and the ruler of Adiabene, who sent large sums of money to the principal men of Jerusalem for the support of the needy. When the famine was most severe, at the feast of the Passover shortly before the harvest, the price of grain rose so high that an *assaron* of wheat sold for four drachmas. At this time seventy *cors* of flour were brought into the court of the temple. The priests, however, remained loyal to the ceremonial laws for the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and refused to eat of the new supplies.[11] This famine was not restricted to Judaea proper, for, as Orosius testifies, all Syria suffered from the shortage of grain.[12]

The General Famine

In the ancient world, as in the modern, famine was always essentially a class famine.[13] Since the poor and the improvident never had large reserves either of money or of food, they suffered immediately upon any considerable rise in the cost of living. The rich, on the other hand, had large reserves both of money and of hoarded grain, and rarely, if ever, experienced hunger during famine. Thus, while all classes of society suffered serious economic discomfort during a shortage of grain, the actual hunger and starvation were restricted to the lower classes. As a famine became more severe, the distress mounted higher and higher in the social structure. Here lies the most crucial problem in the study of ancient famines, for the classical historians were little concerned with specific economic evidence, and never definitely recorded the extent to which famine pervaded the social structure of the ancient world.

Famine, then, did not consist in an absolute lack of food in the areas afflicted with scarcity. It centered rather in the current price of grain, and was caused by all the factors which raised the price of food. Among these causes primary importance must be given to

[11] The incident at the passover, recorded by Josephus in Antiq. III, 320 f., must refer to this famine, although there is some difficulty with regard to the high priest mentioned by Josephus (cf. F. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake, loc. cit.). H. Thackeray, in a note on this passage in the Loeb edition of the Antiquitates, places the incident during the rule of Nero on the ground that it is said to have occurred shortly before the great war. Yet from the point of view of the institution of the Mosaic ordinances about which Josephus is here writing, the reign of Claudius fulfills this requirement.

[12] Orosius, Hist. VII, 6. 12.

[13] The views here summarized are based upon a study of all famines in the Roman world to the time of Trajan, and will be presented fully in my doctoral dissertation.

local failures of the harvest, to the cost of importing grain from other regions, and especially to the speculation in grain and the hoarding which attended the delays in importing additional supplies of food. A universal famine, therefore, need not be explained by a general failure of the harvest. It is rather to be found in a general increase in the price of food, and in the universal inability of the poor to purchase food at the current price.

Now a failure of the harvest in one or two lands might easily affect the price of grain in the whole Mediterranean world. The failure of the afflicted countries to export grain, and perhaps even the necessity of transporting grain to supply their needs, would certainly have some effect upon all the markets of the Roman world. This was particularly true if Egypt suffered from scarcity, for this country ordinarily exported enormous quantities of grain.

The general famine under Claudius, therefore, consisted in the general dearness of wheat, caused most probably by the conjunction of the Egyptian and the Syrian failures of the harvest. The Egyptian famine is clearly dated in 45, extending at least into the spring of 46, and possibly into the year 47. Before the markets of the world could recover from the effect of this shortage, the failure of the harvest throughout Judaea and Syria either further raised prices or delayed the return to a more normal cost of living. Inasmuch as Helena was able to obtain grain from Egypt, it seems probable that, as the chronology indicates, the Egyptian famine slightly preceded the Judaean misfortune, so that, although the two countries for a time suffered contemporaneously, the Judaean famine grew more severe as the Egyptian situation improved. Thus when the Judaean famine reached its height, the improvement in Egypt made it possible to dispatch supplies for the relief of Jerusalem. In view of the evidence for famine in Egypt in the spring of 46, it seems evident that the Judaean famine was not relieved by Helena before the spring of 47. However, it should be noted that the supplies purchased by Helena do not afford conclusive proof that the countries from which these supplies were obtained had superfluous stores of food. The merchants naturally desired to sell their goods in the areas of greatest distress, for there they could obtain the highest price. While the Roman government at times restricted the exportation of grain, particularly from Egypt, official permission for exportation might have been granted, not indeed for humanitarian reasons, but in order to minimize the political discontent which was aroused by every severe famine.[14]

[14] This was probably the reason that permission was given in 24–23 B.C. to export

The conjunction of the Egyptian and the Judaean famine certainly raised the cost of living in the West. The situation in western lands may have been intensified by internal dissensions during 45 in the most important western area for the production of grain, Africa. While little is known of the campaign of Galba in this year, it is striking that an African procurator found it necessary to undertake a military campaign.[15] Although the campaign was directed apparently against the Maurusii, a tribe living on the south-western border of the Roman possessions, the disturbance caused by the tribe evidently extended into Mauretania. It would appear, therefore, that the African supplies of grain may have been diminished in the very year of the Egyptian famine.

There is, therefore, no reasonable doubt that in all countries of the Mediterranean world the poor had to pay a higher price for food, and to suffer the distress of hunger when their money was exhausted. This was famine in the real sense of the word, as the word famine was conceived by the ancient writers. The universal famine of Luke is, therefore, definitely established by historical evidence. Since at this time the Christians were largely from the more impoverished classes of society, they were among the very first to experience the general distress.

Luke's Evidence for the General Famine

The statement that a general famine occurred is occasionally encountered in the ancient sources.[16] In some instances there is clearly no basis for the statement. The populace of one district, when they were afflicted with famine, sometimes imagined that other countries experienced the same distress, although they had definite knowledge only of local conditions. In some cases this inference may have been made because of the difficulty of importing supplies for the relief of the local famine. Certainly if the municipal officials were charged with negligence in the supervision of the food supply of the city, they would naturally repel the charge by asserting that a shortage of grain

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from Egypt to Judaea for the relief of famine more than three and a half million modii of wheat (Josephus, Antiq. XV, 299–316), although there was a famine at Rome in 23 (Velleius Paterculus, II, 94. 3; Suet. Tiberius, 8).

[15] Cf. Münzer in Pauly-Wissowa, Real-encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft, 2te Reihe, VII, 777 f.

[16] Cf. Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum, no. 3973; J. Palanque, Famines à Rome à la fin du IVe siècle, in Revue des études anciennes, XXXIII, 1931, pp. 346–356; also Dio, LIV, 1. 2.

in other localities hindered the early importation of grain. Consequently, the popular inference of extensive famine may have been made rather frequently during local famines.

Yet definite evidence of widespread famine, whenever such actually occurred, was available. The Roman officials in all the provinces were able to estimate every year the approximate totals of the approaching harvest, and they certainly did this in order to determine the approximate income of the annual revenue of the province.[17] These estimates of the approaching harvest were dispatched to Rome, not only to the emperor, but also to the *Praefectus annonae*, whose duty it was to ensure the transportation to Rome of sufficient grain for the sustenance of the capital city.[18] This official, therefore, possessed every year official reports of the state of the grain supply in all regions under the domination of the empire. Since Jews were at various times in the service of the imperial *annona*, as well as in the high favor of the emperor, it is entirely possible that accurate evidence of general conditions was transmitted to Palestine in the middle of the reign of Claudius.[19]

Another source of accurate information was the reports of the merchants of grain, who were well acquainted with the general conditions every year. While in private transactions they might misrepresent the extent of the scarcity for personal gain, deception was not easily practised when they dealt with the officials of the local governments. In Syria, as in other parts of the Roman world, the municipal officials were responsible for obtaining the supply of food for the city.[20] In making their arrangements for the importation of grain in accordance with their official duties, they naturally had direct relations with the merchants. Inasmuch as they had official means of communication, not only with other municipalities, but also with other provinces and with Rome through the provincial procurator, they could rarely be deceived by false reports. This was particularly true at Antioch, which was a commercial center of great importance.

[17] In Egypt these estimates were based upon the rise of the Nile (Strabo, XVII, 1. 48). In republican Sicily the Lex Hieronica provided for a yearly enrollment of farmers and for a yearly declaration of the acreage under cultivation (Cicero, in Verrem, actio II, III, 38, 120). In other provinces similar estimates presumably were made.

[18] On the Praefectus annonae, see O. Hirschfeld, Die Kaiserlichen Verwaltungsbeamten[2], Berlin, 1905, pp. 240 ff.

[19] Karl Schmidt (op. cit., I, p. 162) refers to the possibility of communication between the Jewish residents of Puteoli and Antioch.

[20] On the responsibility of local officials for the supply of grain, see M. Rostovtzeff, in Pauly-Wissowa, VII, 185 f.

At Antioch accurate information of general conditions was available, both from official and from semi-public sources. Since Luke, the author of the Acts, was probably a native of Antioch,[21] it is clear that he may have had access to reliable sources of information concerning the shortage of grain and the general famine.

We conclude, therefore, that the evidence of official documents among the papyri from Egypt and of the independent sources, Pliny and Josephus, so supports Luke's account of the universal famine that the accuracy of the statement can no longer be challenged.

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[21] Cf. A. Harnack, Luke the Physician, New York, 1907, pp. 20 ff.

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